

Composing Letters and Notes of Condolence

A thoughtful letter of condolence is both a tribute to the deceased and a source of comfort and courage to the living. These guidelines are not presented as a set of rigid rules; rather, they are offered as suggestions for transforming your feelings, concerns, sympathy, and love into meaningful written communication. Many people have told us that they reread letters of condolence again and again, days, months, and even years after the loss. Some even pass these letters down through the family for generations. A sensitive letter of condolence is not only an enduring consolation but it is an enduring conversation.

Unfortunately, many people miss the essence of good letter writing when they sit down to begin. They find it difficult to express themselves in a simple, natural way; instead, they think they must write "better" than they speak. In an effort to be literary and correct they sound affected and lose the quality of personal sincerity. Generally, with the exception of a business letter of condolence, writers should make every effort to write as if they were speaking with the bereaved. A good letter is like a visit on paper. Use your usual vocabulary and phrasing. Ideally, the person who receives your letter should almost be able to see and hear you while reading it.

Letters: The Seven Components

After studying thousands of condolence letters and analyzing their structure, we have identified seven key components. While many beautiful and profound letters of condolence do not contain all seven components, or use them in a different sequence, understanding these components provides the writer with a practical, simple, and clear outline. The order of the components is not carved in stone; however, the order presented here is that most frequently noted.

Acknowledge the loss

If you have been informed of the death by a source other than the person to whom you are writing, note how you came to learn of the news. Here it is perfectly appropriate to relate one's shock and dismay at hearing about the loss. This acknowledgment immediately sets clear the purpose and tone of the letter. No matter what the circumstance, it is always advisable in your letter to mention the deceased by name.

Express your sympathy

Express your sorrow sincerely. In sending your words of sympathy, you let the grieving persons know that you care and that, in some way, you relate to the anguish of their loss. Be honest; don't hesitate to use the word death or note the actual cause of death, even suicide. If you knew the person who died, which of course is not always the case, by sharing your own sadness you support the bereaved and remind them that they are not completely alone in their suffering.

Note special qualities of the deceased

Take a moment to acknowledge those characteristics you cherished most about the deceased. These may be specific attributes such as a keen wit, generous nature, or love of sports. They may be personality characteristics, for example, courage, leadership, or decisiveness. They may be ways in

which the individual related to the world, as through religious devotion or community service. When you recount such qualities, you help remind the bereaved that their loved one was appreciated by others. If you didn't know the deceased personally, you may wish to recount qualities you have heard about.

Recount a memory about the deceased

Early in bereavement, memories of the deceased are often temporarily dimmed. This can be frightening for those in grief. Relate a brief, memorable anecdote or two. In the recounting, try to capture what it was about the deceased that evoked your appreciation, affection, or respect. You may wish to say a few words about how he or she touched and influenced your life. And don't avoid humorous incidents; they can be most appropriate and very gratefully received. Laughter is a great healer.

Note special qualities of the bereaved

The loss of a loved one can be so overwhelming that strong feelings of inadequacy surface and the bereaved may feel shaky about even their most basic abilities. They typically experience at least a transitory impairment in their usual capacity for self-appreciation and self-love. This is a time when even the most courageous individuals will appreciate your reminding them of their personal strengths, especially those qualities that will help them through this period. These may be traits that you know served them through adversity in the past such as resilience, patience, competence, religious devotion, optimism, or trusting nature. This can be beautifully amplified if you recall a loving remark about the survivor that was once made by the deceased.

Offer assistance

Many, but not all, sympathy letters include an offer to help. If you sincerely wish to offer your assistance, do so, but if you choose not to, you can still write a beautiful condolence letter. If you decide to offer help keep in mind that the standard, "Let me know if there is anything I can do," may put a burden on the grieving individual to ask you for assistance. Although a general offer to help is not out of line, a more sensitive approach reflecting your sincere desire to be of help is to make a specific offer (doing the grocery shopping, running errands, answering the phone, taking care of the children, helping with correspondence). Those in the numbness of early grief can often scarcely hear the well meant, "Is there anything I can do?" let alone summon up a vision of what actually needs to be done. Your caring sentiment and genuine offer to help may be more readily accepted if you are willing to take the initiative. Once having made an offer, be sure to follow through on your promise.

Close with a thoughtful word or phrase

The closing in a letter of condolence can be particularly significant. Let your concluding words reflect the truth of your feelings. Is it "love," "fondly," "yours truly," "sincerely," or would you prefer to close with a phrase or sentence that reiterates your sympathy? For example:

My affectionate respects to you and yours.

Our love is with you always.

You are in my thoughts and prayers.

You know you have my deepest sympathy and my love and friendship always.

My heart and my tears are with you.

We share in your grief and send you our love.

We offer our affectionate sympathy and many beautiful memories.

My thoughts are with you now, and I send you my deepest sympathy.

We all join in sending you our heartfelt love.

Sympathy Notes: The Four Components

On occasion, you may wish to express your sympathy in a short note rather than a letter. Or, you may wish to write a brief personal note on a commercial condolence card. We suggest that you consider including the following four of the seven basic components described previously.

Dear Colleen,

1. Acknowledge the loss

Our family was deeply saddened today when we heard from Bill that you had lost your mother.

2. Express your sympathy

We are all thinking of you and send our heartfelt sympathy.

3. Note special qualities of the deceased or the bereaved, or recount a memory about the deceased.

In the years we lived next door, your mother was the most wonderful neighbor! She was always warm, gracious, and ready to lend a hand. We feel fortunate to have known her.

4. Close with a thoughtful word or phrase

With affection and deepest condolences.